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FLIGHT SPEED OF BIRDS

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Duck hunters sometimes declare mallards, pintails, and other waterfowl they miss were traveling 75, 100, or even 150 miles an hour. More likely, the birds were flying between 40 and 70 miles an hour.

So many people write to the Department of Agriculture asking about the speed of birds that May Thacher Cooke of the Biological Survey has compiled a brief summary of some of the more reliable reports on flight speeds. Drawing on information in nearly 100 articles and books, she has tabulated records for more than 100 birds.

Speeds of 50 to 60 miles an hour have been recorded for mallards. Faster speeds for pintails and canvasbacks--65 and 72 miles an hour, respectively--have been reported by ornithologists using airplanes. Although the wing surface of the mallard is about 20 percent greater than that of the swifter canvasback, the "can" makes up for its small wings by beating them faster. In addition, its wind resistance probably is less because it is more streamlined.

Ducks, when pressed, increase their speed possibly a third, but geese are able to accelerate very little. Canada geese maintain a top speed of 60 miles an hour for only a short time. Most of the speed flight records indicate the greatest level speed of which birds are capable. Birds, even of the same species, vary greatly in their flying ability. Their age, state of plumage, and other physical

conditions affect their flying. Wind and other atmospheric conditions also cause variations, and for these reasons no hard and fast rules can be laid down as to bird speeds.

Duck hawks can travel about three times as fast as most ducks and are the fastest flying birds reported. One of these hawks diving on its victim flew 165 to 180 miles an hour when timed with a stop watch. Diving at a flock of ducks at a velocity of nearly 175 miles an hour, an aviator reports that a hawk, presumably a duck hawk, passed him "as though the plane was standing still" and struck one of the ducks.

Rapid wingbeats or erratic flight sometimes give a false impression of great speed. A black-headed gull, which has a deliberate wingbeat, almost kept pace with a golden plover whose rapidly moving wings made it appear much swifter. The seeming speed of swallows is partly due to their constant twisting and turning.

Speeds of 20 miles an hour are recorded for both the purple martin and the blue jay, although the former appears to be the faster flier. Two records on the Ruby-throated hummingbird list its velocity in easy flight at 45 and 55 miles an hour. A Georgia ornithologist in recording the speed of Bobwhites in all types of wind found them flying 28 to 38 miles an hour. Another record of the Bobwhite shows that it flew 49 miles an hour when frightened.

Birds in migration are popularly supposed to fly at great altitudes, but aviators report it is exceptional to see any birds more than 5,000 feet above the earth and that few are seen above 3,000 feet. At great altitudes the lessened buoyancy of the air probably makes the flight of birds more difficult just as it does for airplanes. There are records of birds seen at very high altitudes, but these birds were mostly in mountainous country where they fly at comparatively short distances above the land.